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Education and Training for the Creative Economy: the Need for New Intermediaries

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Backstory

In the last 25 years we have become aware of the existence, and growth, of the creative industries. These creative industries are different to the traditional arts and cultural fields (usually not for profit, informal and/or state funded); specifically, they are defined as activities that primarily generated economic value via trading in intellectual property rights: what we would recognise as commercial culture.

The creative industries represent the blending of popular culture and technology that first emerged in the 1930s with film and took off in the 1960s with music and television. In the 2000s a new technological revolution occurred with respect to the economics as well as craft of cultural production (and critically distribution and consumption) which was remade courtesy of the internet and digitisation.

There are many different dimensions of this growth and change, not least that it is particularly sensitive to demographic changes, and especially to those countries that are dominated by growing youth cohorts (the biggest producers and consumers of the creative industries) such as those of SE Asia, China and India. This growth also has a consequence for education and training, the focus of this paper. Naively, one might expect that the employment prospects and demand for artists (of various kinds) would be the answer. However, I want to argue that on closer reflection it is not just more, but quite different arts and culture worker skill sets, that will be required: specifically, those of translation and intermediation.

Convergence and growth

Whilst the contemporary debate about the creative industries began in Europe it has quickly evolved into a global discourse. This international debate has explored the subtlety and apparent contradictions of the growth of what has become known as the

creative economy by UN agencies. The creative economy is a field that bridges the old one of arts and culture, and that of the new creative industries. It is a complex amalgam of commercial and state, formal and informal, activities woven together in by what is best termed a 'creative ecosystem'. UN agencies have refined definitions, and critically, developed monitoring and measures of employment and trade that have surprised many in terms of the scale of importance of the creative economy to wider economies, and to global trade. In an about turn, politicians and policy makers have latterly come to recognise that the creative economy is about jobs and growth, as well as about identity, branding and soft power. The question is how to support the creative economy?

Whilst they were initially conceived of as separate, the creative industries are in practice closely related to the traditional fields of arts and culture. The relationship is better characterised as, on one hand, a co-dependency of the for, and not for profit activities; state, formal and informal activities. Indeed, some have argued that the fine arts act as the R and D lab of the creative industries. On the other hand, we can note the development and profusion of 'art forms', 'disciplines' or 'industries', and their lively interaction, and the convergence between them. These two dimensions underpin a dynamic and fast changing field.

The creative economy is growing, and it plays an increasingly important role in both economy and society that politicians, industry, and the general population, are fast becoming aware of. However, the logical question is: are we feeding the 'pipeline' with sufficiently trained creatives to achieve and sustain this potential? This is a challenge: does it requires not simply 'more' creatives; or, as I will argue here, a different type of expertise from the traditional one based in craft skills and excellence? And, what does that mean for education systems?

The creative ecosystem

Our traditional notion of artistic and creative training has been focused on particular art forms, training, skills and excellence reflected in the old division of commercial and non-commercial creative and arts activities; as well as the implicit economic value and cultural quality judgements that follow. This sort of formation was suited to the autonomous field of culture that we were familiar with in the early and mid-20th century. In the early 21st century, the role of technology which generated low-cost distribution and reproduction, and hence huge makers/ audiences was supercharged by the growth, demographics and in disposable income that the youth represent. Here new needs have been created for multi-media and cross-disciplinary arts production, as well as commercial creative disciplines, working in parallel with state funded activities.

This fast evolving 'cultural soup' of activities can be best understood as a vibrant and interdependent 'ecosystem'. As noted above, the different art forms are overlapping, and

the traditional boundaries of commercial, and non-commercial are being eroded. This does not mean that everything is becoming the same; rather, that a new organisational form is emerging: critical to understanding this is the production cycle.

Academics and policy makers have defined this production cycle as on passing through five phases: creating, making, distributing, exchanging and archiving. No matter which art form this cycle needs to be followed through. Critically, if the cycle is broken, or unbalanced, development stalls. Too many artists, not enough venues; lots of performance, but too small audiences because they were not educated to appreciate the art forms; not enough skilled artists to generate output, etc. The challenge then is not only to produce artists and creatives, but all the allied and related 'enabling' activities that mobilise the production system. We're all familiar with the list of credits that we view at the end of a film; we are often surprised at the job names and length of this list, but we recognise that without their support the 'stars' would not be able to do their job: they are co-dependent.

This explains why art schools and others involved in creative education have expanded their scope of late, adding the craft skills of writing, scenery, costume, filming and lighting, as well as those digital effects. However, it has not stopped there, the expertise of management, finance and legal is critical, on the one hand, if artist rights are to be protected. and on the other hand, if intellectual property is to be exploited as a revenue stream. Early experiments of adding a 'Business 101' to arts courses have given way to developing new hybrids that appreciate the unique challenges of the creative economy and its unique risk profile, as well as the need for 'new intermediaries' to activate this.

Intermediation is key to understanding the 'magic' of managing risk innovation/creativity. The received idea of knowledge transfer (as in a 'parcel of knowledge') ignores the power and processes of networking and collaboration. Instead, we should understand this as an active and intelligent creation of new knowledge in an active translation and mediation process. Put simply a process where $1+1=3$, a generative process.

The challenge is that on the one hand the typical success rate of 20% for a new product or service in the creative sector, and on the other hand, there are potential monopoly profits from the 'winner takes all' nature of many cultural fields. Constantly changing products and services require a constant reinvention and this requires agile process and personal. Learning how to work in and across such project-based enterprises. Let alone to thrive and survive is a hall mark of the contemporary cultural worker. The flexibility is brought for the corporate at the costs of risk and precarity for the individual. Like in a game of musical chairs whilst the music plays, all seems to go well; however, 'when the music stops' there is a problem with insufficient chairs. The music stopped with covid-19.

Learning from COVID-19

One of the lessons that was already known in the creative economy, but reinforced by COVID-19, was the challenge of interdependence and resilience. When things stopped, we began to appreciate the precarious state that creative production existed in. The constant pace of activity had obscured the delicate interdependencies that mediated between different forms and processes. Moreover, we had failed to fully appreciate how often the 'added' value was the very ways in which the different components were intermediated and assembled. Quite literally the creative economy is more than the sum of its parts, the overlooked 'oil that lubricates the system' are the intermediaries who possess not only specific artistic, craft and technical skills, but also enjoy the ability of translate ideas between, and to mediate between various agents. It is these translation and intermediation activities that enable the creative economy to thrive. Accordingly, if we want to grow and sustain the creative economy it is not simply more artists that we need, but more intermediaries.

Two new areas of expertise are required: first managing in, with and between the commercial and state sectors; and second, managing with the process of cultural production. The former is more obviously understood, the latter needs some elaboration. Both are difficult. Managing within cultural production refers to the challenge of aligning the cycle of cultural production. An artist on their own does not communicate to anybody; however, given an informed audience, a venue, and opportunity to meet other audiences then there is the potential to grow and develop.

It is striking that this transversal – relational – horizontal networking that is characterised by the creative sector has been slow to be appreciated. Once recognised, it remains difficult to map and monitor (as it is, by definition, 'in-between' organisations, and accounting systems), let alone to support and sustain. These challenges are not only for creative practitioners across the ecosystem, but for policy makers who are also constrained by their own 'silos' of organisation and remit. Policy making has often been seen as a task of balancing inputs and outputs (artists and cultural experiences); however, perhaps it is time to focus on governing and sustaining the ecosystem rather than legislating on the value of potential outputs.

The task is to recognise organisational challenges, as well as the those of individual workers who need to be able to reach across the organisational boundaries (and that may mean commercial/not, state/civil society, etc.) to make things happen. Organisational flux is possible when there are skilled individuals that not only have particular skills in a narrow field, but also have the translation skills to work across boundaries. This is a lesson that is being learned in the cultural sector, and it is one that is percolating to the wider economy as well.

The creative economy is not a unicorn; rather, to mix metaphors, ‘a canary in the coal mine’. On reflection, we will also need to rethink the relevance of the traditional science and maths (STEM) toolkit. In short, it’s not simply a question of adding some arts/creativity to this model (referred to as STEAM) as seems to be implied by revisions to the 2021 OECD PISA test; rather we need to go further in developing new connective skills and institutions that can translate and mediate what traditionally have been seen as separate knowledge domains of the arts and sciences: only this will deliver real added value (commercial and cultural).

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About the author

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He established the first Department of Culture and the Creative Industries

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He specializes the analysis of the cultural industries globally. This research has three strands. The first focuses on the social and economic dynamics of clustering and knowledge exchange. The second strand concerns the definition and measurement of employment in the cultural, or creative, industries. The third concerns cultural governance and policy making at the national, regional and urban scales. He has worked with UNESCO, UNCTAD, WIPO, the World Bank and many national and city government on these topics.

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